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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001324

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR CA/VO, CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, EAP/BCLTV

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12598: N/A

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SUBJECT: MFA'S RANGOON BRANCH OFFICE STILL OPEN FOR VISAS

REF: A) Rangoon 1295 and previous  
B) Rangoon 84

11. (SBU) Summary: On November 22, conoff met with MFA's Consular Division Director to discuss anticipated changes in visa processing due to the ongoing GOB move to a new administrative capital in Pyinmana, particularly as it affects USG official travelers. The MFA official advised that visa processing would slow down significantly as government workers cope with the sudden relocation and also shared information about how the GOB processes official visa requests, how the move to Pyinmana was affecting the MFA, and how the GOB handles visas for Amcit tourists. End summary.

12. (SBU) On November 18, post was informed by Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Consular Division staff that they were closing down for business immediately, in preparation for their move to the new GOB administrative capital of Pyinmana (ref A). On November 22, conoff followed up with the Consular Division Director, who assured us that visa processing in Rangoon is going on, although he admitted that things will "slow down" for an uncertain period because the Ministry is very short-staffed. With its Deputy Director and most other staff members now transferred to Pyinmana, it appears that the Consular Division is trying to put on a brave face and keep things moving as best it can.

13. (SBU) During the conversation, the Director revealed some of the MFA internal process for approving official visa requests. Obtaining Burmese visas for USG TDY staff from surrounding posts, and even tourist visas for USG diplomatic passport holders, is usually a long and very unpredictable process. Some Burmese embassies overseas issue visas quickly; others stall until the travel date arrives and the travel must be canceled. Over a year ago, post agreed with MFA to back-channel visa requests from USG officials in neighboring countries with a diplomatic note to expedite visa issuance. This has, in fact, added another layer of bureaucracy and has not always produced the desired result of greater expediency. The Director stated that all applications from diplomatic and official passport holders must now be personally approved by either the Deputy Minister or the Minister, and sometimes - depending on the nature of the visit - by the regime's Foreign Affairs Policy Committee, which meets once a week on Tuesdays. Following this process, the case is transmitted to the Burmese embassy concerned, which might then add an extra amount of time before it gets around to issuing the visa (in one recent case, the Burmese Embassy in Dhaka neglected to forward a US diplomat's visa application to Rangoon for over two weeks; when we investigated we were told that the Dhaka embassy's "fax machine was broken").

14. (SBU) Conoff also took the opportunity to inquire about the issuance of tourist visas for Amcits with regular passports. The Director stated that "we do not discriminate" by country, and that there has been no change in procedures for tourist visas. Burmese embassies are allowed to be independent in their issuance of tourist visas, and most Burmese embassies issue them the same day as the application is lodged. Conoff also asked about the GOB's "e-visa." (Note: the e-visa was an innovation introduced under former Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt, which allowed tourists to apply for their visas on-line and receive an electronic approval that could then be used to board Burma-bound airlines and receive visas upon arrival. The e-visa was discontinued in early 2005, probably as part of an overall purge of Khin Nyunt-led initiatives when he was ousted from the government and arrested. End note.) The MFA official stated that this program has not yet been reinstated. However, travel agencies are allowed to process visas electronically for tour groups, through the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism. According to post records, the vast majority of visiting Amcits travel to Burma on organized tours.

15. (SBU) When asked about future plans, the MFA official confirmed that almost everyone in MFA would eventually move to Pyinmana, including the ministers. When asked about his own move, the Consular Division Director said that, for health reasons, he would stay in Rangoon and would then retire. (The note-taker at the meetings told conoff later that she would be moving to Pyinmana next month and, as a single parent, regretted having to leave her daughter behind). The Director suggested that the MFA Protocol Division would likely remain in Rangoon, as it will have to continue to interact with foreign embassies. He stated that Protocol would start to handle assignment visas and

stay permits. Asked about a timeline for the Consular Division's move, he would only say that "diplomatic missions will be notified." When asked about the fate of the vacant ministerial buildings, the Director opined that they would probably go "to enterprises." He did not specify whether this meant private or commercial enterprises.

16. (SBU) Conoff also asked about the Passport Office and whether it would move to Pyinmana, as this has a direct impact on the embassy's visa workload. MFA official told us that there was a Passport Board meeting last week, and it determined that the Passport Office would remain in Rangoon for the time being. Post has observed a sharp spike in Burmese passport issuances since passport requirements were relaxed in early 2005 (ref B), which most directly affects our IV workload. A check of passport numbers (Burmese passport numbers are sequential) issued over the past five years indicates an approximate average of passport issuances per month as follows:

2000 - 3200 per month  
2001 - 2700 per month  
2002 - 6400 per month  
2003 - 8800 per month  
2004 - 4600 per month (Note: this drop is likely due to the introduction of "e-passports," or machine-readable passports, issued to businessmen as well as seaman, which are the majority of our NIV applicants. These e-passports are not included in this tally, and have also been discontinued in the wake of Khin Nyunt's ouster. End note)  
2005 - 13,100 per month

17. (SBU) Comment: MFA staff are used to following orders, like everyone else in Burma, but they are now in the uncomfortable position of having to explain the move to Pyinmana both to themselves and to foreign missions. It appears that the Consular Division Director is giving us the proper prepared responses, but his body language and his note-taker's aside told a different story. It remains unclear how efficiently requests for official visas will be processed once most of the MFA moves to Pyinmana, but we believe official travelers could face increasing delays and difficulties in obtaining their visas. We recommend that any USG officials planning to come to Burma, whether for work or tourism, plan far ahead and try to be as flexible as possible. End comment.  
VILLAROSA